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Walking with The Wound: An Anthropology of Partition, Pride, and The Queer Refusal to Disappear in Bengal

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Abstract

This article offers a queer feminist anthropological analysis of gender and sexual minority activism and cultural representation across West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh from the 1990s to the present. It argues that queer activism in Bengal is irreducibly shaped by the dual inheritances of Partition (1947) and Liberation (1971), by the differential articulation of secular and Islamic state power on either side of the border, and by the persistent tension between subaltern queer survival and the aspirational politics of visibility. Methodologically, the research draws on patchwork ethnography, combining participant observation in queer organising spaces, sustained conversation with activists and community members across Kolkata, Dhaka, and Bengal's districts, and digital ethnography (netnography) of queer social media communities, alongside active membership in the organising collective of the 18th Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk (2019). The article traces four interlocking arguments: the street as a queer political territory; the Pride Walk's democratic organisational form as political practice; the production of queer martyrdom and memory in Bangladesh; and the emergence of a digitally mediated Bengali queer imaginary that crosses the partition border through shared language and solidarity.

Keywords: *Queer activism, Feminist anthropology, Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk, Islamic fundamentalism, Digital queer culture*

1. Introduction: The Street as a Political Question

Who may occupy the street and who may walk on it with a rainbow flag, name their desire without apology, and make themselves visible to a state that has worked persistently to render them invisible, is a fundamentally political question about democratic life. In Bengal, a geographic and cultural region carved into two nations by Partition in 1947 and reshaped by Liberation in 1971, this question has been answered differently on either side of a border that divides a people sharing a language, a literary tradition, a food habits, a same kinship, same culture and a long history of entangled queer lives.

This article reads the Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk or KRPW as Asia's first queer Pride parade, begun in 1999 with fifteen people in yellow t-shirts, not as a growing celebration but as a continuing experiment in claiming democratic space for bodies that patriarchal, casteist, and heteronormative societies have declared illegitimate. It reads the Hijra Pride Parade in Dhaka in 2014 as an assertion of dignified visibility by a community the Bangladeshi state had just formally, if inadequately, recognised. And it reads the assassination of Xulhaz Mannan and Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy in 2016 as the violent response of a religious patriarchal order that understood, with lethal clarity, what queer public culture threatened.

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A queer feminist anthropological approach refuses both the liberal triumphalism of Pride as progress and the catastrophism of queer life under Islamist and Hindutva authoritarianism as pure victimhood. It insists instead on the complexity of queer political life: on the internal negotiations, horizontal democratic processes, funding debates, and intersectional tensions that make the Pride parade a political form as much as a celebratory one; and on the way the border between West Bengal and Bangladesh is simultaneously an obstacle and a permeable membrane for queer community, culture, and solidarity (Scott, 1990; Spivak, 1988).

2. Methodology: Patchwork, Presence, and the Digital Field

This research is grounded in patchwork ethnography (Günel, Varma & Watanabe, 2020): a mode of fieldwork that assembles knowledge from multiple, discontinuous, and geographically dispersed sites of encounter. No single field site could adequately represent the diversity of queer political practice across two nation-states, numerous cities and districts, and multiple registers of visibility and concealment. The researcher's positionality as a queer anthropologist from Bengal, who is fluent in Bengali, embedded in activist networks on both sides of the border, is, in Haraway's (1988) sense, one of the research's primary instruments rather than a contamination of it.

The most politically charged site of participant observation was the researcher's active involvement in the organising collective of KRPW 2019. Such as attending planning meetings, joining the finance team as a working member, participating in the Google mail chain that constituted the collective's deliberative infrastructure, and walking in the Pride on December 29, 2019. This insider position produced qualitatively different knowledge than observation alone could have permitted: access not only to the outcomes of deliberation but to its texture, interpersonal dynamics, and the political values animating disagreement.

Beyond KRPW 2019, extended conversations, rather than formal interviews, were the primary mode of engagement with interlocutors. Conversation is reciprocal, ongoing, and co-productive; it allows interlocutors to set their own terms of disclosure and maintain control over how their experience enters the research record (Madison, 2012). Key interlocutors in Kolkata, and activists in Dhaka, Chittagong, and Khulna contacted through telephone, WhatsApp, Messenger, and social media under varying conditions of confidentiality, were engaged through sustained relational processes over months and years. For Bangladesh-based interlocutors, where the risk profile of queer identification is significantly higher, additional ethical caution governed what is reported and how; all identities are protected by pseudonyms or with explicit consent over telephonic conversation and Messenger chats.

The digital ethnographic component follows Hine (2000, 2015) and Kozinets (2010, 2020) in treating online queer communities as primary field sites. Digital fieldwork was conducted across the KRPF Facebook infrastructure and Google mail chain; closed Ulti language practice groups on Facebook and Messenger; queer literary pages including 'Annyo purusher galpo' and 'Samopremer galpo'; and the social media presence of Equal Bangladesh, Boys of Bangladesh, the Bangladeshi Asexual Association, and the surviving digital archive of Roopbaan. The three methods of participant observation, conversation, and netnography are not merely additive. Each illuminate what the others cannot reach alone.

3. Structural Conditions: Partition, Colonial Law, and the Governance of Queer Life

To understand queer activism in Bengal, one must begin with Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (1861), which criminalised "carnal intercourse against the order of nature." This was not merely a legal provision but, as Narrain and Eldridge (2009) and Baudh (2008) have argued, a wholesale transplantation of Victorian sexual morality into South Asian legal culture, what Puar (2007) might call homonationalism in reverse: the coloniser exporting sexual normativity as a component of civilisational governance. Its particular tragedy is that both successor states retained it at Independence. In India, it persisted until Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India (Supreme Court of India, 2018). In Bangladesh, inherited via the Pakistani Penal Code, it remains on the books, carrying the additional weight of alignment with dominant Islamic moral discourse.

This differential legal trajectory is a structural key to understanding divergent forms of queer activism on either side of the border. In West Bengal, the campaign to repeal Section 377 provided a unifying legal horizon enabling broad coalitions across the LGBTQ+ spectrum and connecting HIV/AIDS activists, feminist legal scholars, and hijra, kothi, and transgender rights workers across three decades of organised struggle. In Bangladesh, without this mobilising horizon, queer activism has been more diffuse, more focused on community support and cultural production, and more exposed to violent reprisal from state and non-state actors alike.

Partition's cultural violence compounded this structural divergence. The literary archive of pre-Partition Bengal contained rich, if coded, representations of same-sex desire in the Bhakti tradition, classical poetry, Baul folk forms as Vanita and Kidwai (2000) have documented. Partition severed these shared cultural resources, replacing them with the heteronormative domesticity of displacement literature. The founding of West Bengal within a secular Indian republic and of East Pakistan within an Islamic moral state produced fundamentally different conditions for the long-term emergence of queer public culture. Bangladesh's 1988 constitutional designation of Islam as the state religion created a juridical environment in which queer rights claims faced not only legal barriers but the delegitimising charge of impiety.

Both Bengals are now caught between two rising forms of religious nationalism that, despite their mutual hostility, share a common investment in disciplining gender and sexuality. In India, Hindutva's ascendancy, the BJP's legislative record of the CAA, the NRC, and the Transgender Persons Bill constitute an authoritarian restructuring that affects queer people at multiple points of intersection. In Bangladesh, the threat has been more immediately lethal: the systematic assassination of secular writers, atheist bloggers, and LGBTQ+ activists by Ansarullah Bangla Team and Ansar al-Islam between 2013 and 2016. That the Home Minister responded to the murder of Xulhaz Mannan by commenting that "our society doesn't permit any movement that promotes unnatural sex" exposed state complicity in the logic of homophobic violence. A queer feminist analysis names the structural continuity between these opposed nationalisms: their shared deployment of female and queer bodies as the symbolic terrain on which social purity is defended.

4. Making the Street: The Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk, 1999–2018

On July 2, 1999, fifteen people in yellow t-shirts undertook the first queer Pride walk in Asia. The organisers' decision to conduct a 'Friendship Walk' to visit NGOs and West Bengal human rights commissions rather than staging a street demonstration. That reflected an acute reading of the conditions of possibility for queer politics in late-1990s India. With fifteen participants, confrontation would have been marginal; by transforming the walk into an exercise in institutional engagement, organisers embedded in the Kolkata Pride a political sensibility that has distinguished it ever since: a commitment to democratic horizontal organisation, broad coalition-building, and the articulation of queer rights within a wider framework of human rights and social justice.

Growth was steady and politically deepening. The 2003 Pride drew over fifty participants; by 2014, 1,600 were walking. The formation of the Kolkata Rainbow Pride Festival (KRPF) as a people's collective in 2011, with its open Facebook page, Google group, and participatory planning structure and institutionalised the democratic character of the process and extended deliberation into digital space. The 2014 walk's centring of the NALSA judgement, which recognised the constitutional rights of transgender persons and their right to self-determination of gender, was a decisive move beyond a politics focused primarily on gay and lesbian rights to one centring the most marginalised members of the queer community: hijra, kinnar, and transgender people. The slogan "amar sorir amar mon, dur hatao raj swashon," that means the state should not interfere in my body, which encapsulated a foundational feminist principle redeployed in a specifically queer register.

The 17th Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk (December 30, 2018), occurring in the immediate aftermath of the Supreme Court's decriminalisation ruling, reveals the movement's political sophistication. Decriminalisation was genuinely celebrated and the anthem "Jodi tor dak sune keu na ase, tobe akla cholo re" (a song written by Rabindranath Tagore) captures the emotional weight of a long struggle's partial recognition.

But the walk simultaneously protested the Transgender Persons Bill, the NRC, and the BJP's broader authoritarian programme. The slogans demanded azadi or liberation from caste, capitalism, fascism, discrimination, oppression, and patriarchy alike. As one activist interlocutor articulated in conversation: the freedom sought is not "azadi from India but azadi in India," not exit from the democratic project but its radical deepening.

5. The Pride Walk as Political Practice: A Case Study of KRPW 2019

The 18th Annual Kolkata Rainbow Pride Walk (December 29, 2019) provides an unusually rich window into the organisational politics of queer movement-building, enabled by the researcher's active participation in the organising collective and by the digital ethnographic record generated by the process itself. The Google mail chain and WhatsApp groups constituting the collective's deliberative infrastructure were not supplementary documentation but primary field data. This was a real-time archive of democratic decision-making that netnographic method was uniquely positioned to capture.

The walk was preceded by an internal conflict when an individual attempted to convene a "Kolkata Pride Walk" planning meeting without the consent of long-standing KRPF members. The response of two queer activist and who are also the interlocuters—issuing an open call in their individual capacity, framing their intervention as a defence of the walk's "democratic, transparent, inclusive and respectful" character—insisted that the Pride Walk is a community event whose decisions must emerge from collective deliberation. The subsequent process of two planning meetings attended by 37 and 40 people, ten specialist teams formed through voluntary self-selection, and a Google mail chain extending participation to those who could not attend physically—constitutes what Young (2000) would recognise as a practice of inclusive democratic communication.

The collective's funding deliberations illuminate the movement's political economy. The rejection of a joint bank account (which would impose income tax liability on individual holders of a community event's funds) and the rejection of the NGO sponsorship model (which would grant funders de facto authority over the walk's character) both reflect the movement's principled protection of its identity as a genuinely popular, community-owned political process. The budget debate, which was between those wanting to match the previous year's INR 1,27,000 expenditure on grounds that spectacular visibility attracts participation, and those arguing for a minimal INR 70,000–80,000 on grounds of political ethics, was, in miniature, one of the central debates of contemporary progressive politics: between the politics of spectacle and the politics of sustained community organising.

The Common Literature co-drafted for KRPW 2019 was distributed as a pamphlet, read aloud in Bengali, Hindi, and English during the walk. This was functioned as a queer feminist manifesto. Three features warrant attention. First, its explicit situating of queer rights within the broader landscape of Hindutva authoritarianism. Those were the NRC, CAA, mob violence against Dalits and Muslims and refuses to confine LGBTQ+ politics to its own identity silo, asserting that "these issues are all queer issues." Second, its critique of biphobia, transphobia, body shaming, femme shaming, and misogynistic language within queer spaces insists that the movement must practise internally the values of inclusion it demands externally, which was a form of collective self-critique rare in political manifestos. Third, its closing invocation that "Pride exists because a black bisexual transwoman, a sex worker, a drag queen threw a brick against police van," and this make pride as a radically political charged riot. This roots the Kolkata movement in Stonewall's radical, intersectional origins, refusing sanitised accounts that erase its founding politics.

6. Bangladesh: Recognition, Martyrdom, and the Survival of Queer Community

The Bangladeshi government's recognition of Hijras as a 'third gender' in November 2013 was a landmark in South Asian gender politics, yet a queer feminist analysis must approach it with both appreciation and critical scrutiny. Third-gender recognition is, in an important sense, a conservative move: it accommodates

hijra identity within a framework that leaves the underlying binary gender system intact, assigning hijra people to a residual category that marks them as constitutively different from and excluded from the normative social institutions built around the male/female binary. As community interlocutors noted, the gap between official recognition and lived reality remained vast. In a country where Section 377 continued to criminalise same-sex relations and where no anti-discrimination law protected queer people from institutional exclusion, formal recognition offered little protection against the grinding daily violence of discrimination and abjection. The Hijra Pride Parade of November 2014, with more than 2,000 hijras marching from Dhaka's Press Club to the National Museum carrying banners declaring "The days of stigma, discrimination and fear are over" was therefore not a report of a social fact but an attempt to bring one into being through collective embodied action in public space.

Xulhaz Mannan and Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy had founded Roopbaan in 2014. It was Bangladesh's first Bengali-language LGBTQ+ magazine and represented a strategic decolonial choice. In a context where LGBTQ+ discourse was dominated by English-language platforms accessible primarily to educated urban elites, Roopbaan's decision to publish in Bengali was an insistence that queer knowledge must be available to the majority of Bengali speakers, and that queerness is not a Western import but a reality of Bengali life requiring Bengali forms of expression. The name Roopbaan, derived from a folk character meaning 'beautiful and fabulous' and that was located queer beauty in indigenous cultural tradition rather than the imported vocabulary of global LGBTQ+ culture. This was a decolonial politics of language that preceded and anticipated the broader scholarly turn to decolonial methodology (Smith, 2012; Mohanty, 2003).

The assassination of Xulhaz Mannan and Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy on April 25, 2016 was a political act with a clear strategic logic: eliminate the most visible advocates of queer public culture to produce a chilling effect on the broader community and demonstrate the lethal consequences of queer visibility. Their murder was, in Scott's (1990) terms, an attempt to destroy the conditions of possibility for the 'hidden transcript' to become public. That it partially succeeded is evidenced by accounts of activists, who have engaged under strict confidentiality and fled the country or went underground. The state's response, as the Home Minister's comment that society "doesn't permit any movement that promotes unnatural sex", have demonstrated that state power and Islamist extremism shared a common investment in suppressing queer public life. Yet the queer movement did not die with Xulhaz and Tonoy. The Xulhaz Mannan Memorial Award for Diversity, established by Equal Bangladesh in 2021, transforms loss into political legacy, what feminist scholars of social movements call the production of political memory, the active work of ensuring that the past is made politically generative in the present (Taylor, 2003).

The emergence of digital queer community platforms across both Bengals constitutes a transborder Bengali queer imaginary that the Partition border cannot fully contain. The story of "Annyo purusher galpo," a Facebook page, created by a Bangladeshi queer person using an Indian phone number to circumvent Facebook's country-based content moderation, jointly administered by a Bangladeshi creator and a Kolkata-based co-admin, accumulating 33,000 followers from both sides of the border within three years of emblematises this imaginary. It demonstrates simultaneously the restrictiveness of national regulatory frameworks, the ingenuity with which queer communities navigate them, and the extent to which the India-Bangladesh border has been rendered permeable by digital technology and shared language. The emergence of asexual communities in both Bengals, the Bangladeshi Asexual Association and the Kolkata-based Bengali Asexuals, which eventually connected and collaborated across the border, further deepens the picture. That 'demisexuality,' 'sex-repulsion,' and 'aromanticism' are being explained and debated in Bengali represents a decolonisation of queer epistemic frameworks: the production of queer knowledge in the language of the community rather than in the borrowed tongue of the global North.

7. Discussion: Towards a Queer Feminist Theory of Bengali Queer Movement

Four theoretical conclusions emerge from this analysis. First, queer movement in Bengal has never been a single thing. The difference between the middle-class, Kolkata-centric, HIV/AIDS-inflected politics of the

early Pride walks and the mass, intersectional, district-wide, and digitally extended politics of contemporary queer activism in West Bengal; the difference between the state-centric advocacy politics of the Hijra Pride in Bangladesh and the underground, martyrdom-haunted survival politics of LGBTQ+ community life after 2016; these are not differences of scale alone but of political condition. A queer feminist analysis must hold these differences with clarity, refusing the false equivalence of a single developmental narrative of progress.

Second, the materiality of queer politics demands sustained analytical attention. The KRPW collective's budget deliberations, its attention to the travel costs of district participants, its negotiation with police stations under conditions of CAA-related lockdown, these are not peripheral details but the substantive content of movement-building. The methodological choice to treat the Google mail chain and WhatsApp groups as primary field sites was precisely what made this material dimension of queer politics analytically visible. Patchwork ethnography, combining embodied participation with netnographic engagement, enabled a reading of democratic practice as theory.

Third, language is a political resource of the first order. The decision to produce Roopbaan in Bengali, to read the KRPW Common Literature in Bangla, to develop Ulti poetry as a medium of community knowledge. All reflect an understanding that the fight for queer recognition is also a fight for queer articulation: for the right to name one's desire, identity, and community in one's own tongue. The Bengali queer movement's distinctive relationship to the Bengali language, simultaneously the site of national and ethnic identity and the medium of subaltern queer expression, gives it a specific character distinguishing it from both global LGBTQ+ movements and queer movements elsewhere in South Asia.

Fourth, the queer feminist perspective insists that the struggle for queer rights in Bengal cannot be disentangled from the wider struggles against patriarchy, casteism, religious fundamentalism, and authoritarian nationalism. The KRPW Common Literature's solidarity with Muslim minorities under the NRC/CAA, with Dalit communities, with Kashmiri people under military occupation is not strategic coalition-building but a principled analysis that recognises the interlocking character of systems of oppression (Butler, 1990; hooks, 1984; Mohanty, 2003). As Nirupam Chanda articulated: anyone who fights against patriarchal norms, in public or in private space, is part of the queer movement. The movement's boundaries are drawn not by identity category but by commitment to liberation.

8. Conclusion: The Refusal to Disappear

This article has traced the history of queer activism across the two Bengals as a story of persistent refusal: the refusal of fifteen people in yellow t-shirts to accept their own invisibility in 1999; the refusal of hijra marchers in Dhaka in 2014 to be confined to the city's margins; the refusal of Xulhaz Mannan and Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy to stop publishing even as the death threats accumulated; the refusal of Bengali queer writers, on both sides of the border, to accept that their desires and identities cannot be named in their own language.

These refusals are not identical in their conditions, their risks, or their political forms. The person who walks in the Kolkata Pride Walk risks social embarrassment, perhaps familial rejection; the person who publishes queer literature in Bangladesh risks their life. The queer feminist anthropologist must hold these differences with clarity, refusing the false equivalence that would reduce all forms of queer political action to a single universal type. And yet the refusals are related: they share a common root in the insistence that queer people are fully human, fully Bengali, fully entitled to the public and private spaces of a democratic life, and that no law, no fatwa, no mob, no government, has the right to take that entitlement away.

The street is not merely a route between two points. It is a political space continuously contested and remade by the people who walk on it, and by those who would prevent them from walking. When 4,000 people march through Kolkata at the end of 2018, they are asserting, with their bodies, in public, that they are here, that they have always been here, and that they are not going anywhere. In a period of rising authoritarian nationalism on both sides of the Bengal border, that assertion is both an act of tremendous courage and a form of queer feminist political theory. A theory, that is walked, sung, shouted, and danced into being on the streets of a divided, wounded, and still dreaming Bengal.

At the end the research must say, “The Pride is not the end of the story. It is the place where the next chapter begins.”

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